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Biko Lives!

Edited by
Andile Mngxitama,
Amanda Alexander,
and Nigel C. Gibson

Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko



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For Strini

BIKO LIVES!

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Biko and the Problematic of Presence

Frank B. Wilderson, III

Let us assume that black people receive the value of Absence. This mode of being becomes existence manqué—existence gone wrong. Their mode of being becomes the being of the NO.

*(Lewis Gordon)*¹

The biggest mistake the black world ever made was to assume that whoever opposed apartheid was an ally.

*(Steven Biko)*²

Black Recognition?

When I first arrived in South Africa in 1989, I was a Marxist. Toward the end of 1996, two and half years after Nelson Mandela came to power, I left not knowing what I was. This is not to say that I, like so many repentant Marxists, had come around to what policy wonks and highly placed notables within the African National Congress (ANC) National Executive Committee (NEC) called for then, a so-called “mixed economy”; a phrase that explained less than nothing but was catchy and saturated with common sense, thus making it unassailable. No, I had not been converted to the “ethics” of the “free” market, but I was convinced the rubric of exploitation and alienation (or a grammar of suffering predicated on the intensification of work and the extraction of surplus value) was not up to the task of (a) describing the structure of the antagonism, (b) delineating a proper revolutionary subject, or (c) elaborating

a trajectory of institutional iconoclasm comprehensive enough to start “the only thing in the world that’s worth the effort of starting: the end of the world, by God!”³

In June 1992, not long after the massacre at Boipatong, Ronnie Kasrils cochaired a Tripartite Alliance Rolling Mass Action meeting with a Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) central committee member and an ANC NEC member. They sat together at a long table on the stage in the basement auditorium of the Allied Bank Building in Johannesburg. One hundred delegates of the Tripartite Alliance had been sent there to plan a series of civil actions designed to paralyze the urban nerve centers of South African cities (“the Leipzig Option” as some called it). I was one of the delegates. Out of 100 people it seemed as though no more than 5 to 10 were White or Indian. There were a few Coloureds. One Black American—me; and eighty to ninety Black South Africans.

We began with songs that lasted so long, and were so loud, and so pointed in their message (“Chris Hani is our shield! Socialism is our shield! Kill the Farmer Kill the Boer!”), that by the time the meeting finally got underway one sensed a quiet tension in the faces of Kasrils and his cochairs. An expression I’d seen time and again since 1991 on the faces of Charterist notables; faces contorted by smiling teeth and knitted brow, solidarity and anxiety; faces pulled by opposing needs—the need to bring the state to heel and the need to manage the Blacks, and it was this need that was looking unmanageable.

Planning for a mass excursion was on the table: An armada of buses, filled with demonstrators, was to ride to the border of the “homeland” of the Ciskei, that was ruled by the notorious General Joshua Oupa Gqozo. We would disembark, hold a rally, then a march, then, at one moment in the march, we would crash through the fence, thus liberating the people of the “homeland” by the sheer volume of our presence. Kasrils and his cochairs looked at one another. Yes, things were indeed getting out of hand. As a round of singing and chanting ensued, they leaned their heads together and whispered.

Comrade Kasrils rises; he exits, stage right; he returns with a small piece of paper. An important intelligence report, comrades, news that should give us pause. Reading from the slip of paper, he says he has just received word that, were we to actually *pass* the motion on the floor to cross the Ciskei border en masse, to flood the “homeland” with out belligerent mass, General Joshua Oupa Gqozo would open fire on us with live ammunition. To Comrade Kasrils’ horror the room erupts in cheers and applause. This, I am thinking, as I join the cheering and the singing, is not the response his “intelligence” was meant to elicit.

Had Comrade Kasrils been hoisted by his own petard or was there dissonance between the assumptive logic through which he and the Tripartite Alliance posed the question: What does it mean to suffer? and the way the question was posed by—or imposed upon—the mass of Black delegates? The divergence of our joy and what appeared to be his anxiety was expressed as divergent structures of feeling that I believe to be symptomatic of a contrast in conceptions of suffering and to be symptomatic of irreconcilable differences in how and where Blacks are positioned, ontologically, in relation to non-Blacks. In the last days of apartheid, we failed to imagine the fundamental difference between the worker and the Black. How we understand suffering and whether we locate its essence in economic exploitation or in anti-Blackness has a direct impact on how we imagine freedom; and on how we foment revolution.⁴

Perhaps the bullets that were promised us did not manifest within our psyches as lethal deterrents because they were manifested as gifts; rare gifts of recognition; gifts unbequeathed to Blackness; acknowledgment that we *did* form an ensemble of Human capacity instead of a collection of kaffirs or a bunch of niggers. We experienced a transcendent impossibility: A moment of Blackness-as-Presence in a world overdetermined by Blackness-as-Absence.

I am not saying that we welcomed the prophesy of our collective death. I am arguing that the threat of our collective death, a threat *in response to the gesture of our collective—our “living”—will*, made us *feel* as though we were alive, as though we possessed what in fact we could not possess, Human life, as opposed to Black life (which is always already “substitutively dead,” “a fatal way of being alive”)⁵—we could die because we lived. It was as though we had penetrated three layers of Absence in the libidinal economy; an economy that organizes the structure of reality in ways that were too often eschewed by South African Marxists, and Charterists more broadly, in favor of the “verifiable” data of political economy; an economy that in many respects was at the center of Steven Biko’s meditations and the foundation of Black Consciousness. Like Steven Biko before him, Lewis Gordon, also a close reader of Frantz Fanon, reminds us of the serious pitfalls and “limitations [in] excluding the evasive aspects of affect from interpretation of reality.”⁶ Building on Lewis Gordon’s ontological schema of Absence and Presence, that is a reconstruction and elaboration of Fanon’s ontological arguments in *Black Skin, White Masks*, I designate three layers of Black Absence, *subjective*, *cartographic*, and *political*, through which we might read the cheering that erupted as affective (rather than discursive) symptoms of an ontological “discovery.”

Absence of Subjective Presence

The world cannot accommodate a black(ened) relation at the level of bodies—subjectivity. Thus, Black “presence is a form of absence” for to see *a* Black is to see *the* Black, an ontological frieze that waits for a gaze, rather than a living ontology moving with agency in the field of vision. The Black’s moment of recognition by the Other is always already “Blackness,” upon which supplements are lavished—American, Caribbean, Xhosa, Zulu, etc. But the supplements are superfluous rather than substantive, they don’t unblacken. As Gordon points out, “there is ‘something’ absent whenever blacks are present. The more *present* a black is, the more absent is this ‘something.’ And the more absent a black is, the more *present* is this something.” Blackness, then, is the destruction of presence, for Blacks “seem to suck presence into themselves as a black hole, pretty much like the astrophysical phenomenon that bears that name.”⁷

The inverse is even more devastating to contemplate vis-à-vis the dim prospects for Blacks in the world. For not only are Whites “prosthetic Gods,” the embodiment of “full presence,” that is, “when a white is absent *something* is absent,” there is “a lacuna in being,” as one would assume given the status of Blackness but Whiteness is also “the standpoint from which others are seen”; which is to say Whiteness is both full Presence *and* absolute perspectivity.⁸

[T]o look at a black body is to look at a mere being-among-beings... [But] the white body, being human (Presence), doesn’t live as a mere-being-among-beings. It lives with the potential to be a being that stands out from mere beings. Its being-in-itself ironically enables it to be a being-for-itself.⁹

Human value is an effect of recognition that is inextricably bound with vision. Human value is an effect of perspectivity. What does it mean, then, if perspectivity, as the strategy for value extraction and expression, is most *visionary* when it is White and most blind when it is Black? It means that “to be valued [is to] *receive* value outside of blackness.”¹⁰ Blacks, then, void of Presence, cannot embody value, and void of perspectivity, cannot bestow value. Blacks cannot *be*. *Their mode of being becomes the being of the NO.*

Absence of Cartographic Presence

In a passage richly suggestive of maps, Gordon writes, “The worlds of the black and the white become worlds separated by Absence leading to ‘fate’ on the one hand and Presence leading to ‘freedom’ on the other. Put differently, the former lives in a world of WHEN and the latter lives in a world of WHETHER.”¹¹ Here the Absence of cartographic Presence resonates in the

libidinal economy in the way Black “homeland” (in this case, the Ciskei) replicates the constituent deficiencies of Black “body” or “subject.” The Black “homeland” is a fated place where fated Black bodies are domiciled. It is the nowhere of no one. But it is more—*or less*—for “homeland” cartography suffers from a double inscription. The “homeland” is an Absence of national Presence drawn on the Absence of continental Presence; a Black “nation” on a Black “continent”; nowhere to the power of two. Lamenting Africa’s status as *terra nullius* in the Human psyche, Sartre wrote, “A great many countries have been present in their time at the heart of our concerns, but Africa... is only an absence, and this great hole in the map of the world lets us keep our conscience clean.”¹² Just as the Black body is a corpus (or corpse) of fated WHEN (when will I be arrested, when will I be shunned, when will I be a threat), the Black “homeland,” and the Black “continent” on which it sits, is a map of fated WHEN “battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships, and above all else, above all ‘Sho good eatin.’”¹³ From the terrestrial scale of cartography to the corporeal scale of the body, Blackness suffers through homologies of Absence.

Absence of Political Presence

The third manifestation of Black Absence that our ecstasy assailed, or perhaps simply *recognized*, that afternoon, was Black Absence from the political hegemony of the Charterist grammar of suffering; a grammar of suffering that ran from tepid—the ANC/UDF formulation in which the political subject is imagined to be dispossessed of citizenship and access to civil society, to lukewarm—the South African Communist Party’s (SACP) formulation in which the political subject is imagined to be dispossessed of labor power. Neither formulation rises to the temperature of the Black’s grammar of suffering. How, inside the Charterist Movement, would it have been possible to articulate a political line that was essential, as opposed to supplemental, to the suffering of Blacks; a grammar of suffering in which the subject is not simply dispossessed of labor power but is a sentient being dispossessed of being? The second question implied here is whether or not Steve Biko’s presence on that stage, instead of Ronnie Kasrils and the Charterist generals, would have been sufficient to transpose our *felt* recognition of a Black grammar of suffering (Absence in a world of Presence) into discourse, and from there into a new political hegemony? Were the seeds of this articulation and transposition in Black Consciousness? If not, why not? And if so, why did they not take root? Such questions have great bearing upon our thinking about the political

past, present, and future of South Africa, if for no other reason than the fact that the presence of Ronnie Kasrils (as the prototypical White, Charterist, radical) on stage that afternoon had been vouchsafed by the absence of Steve Biko from that stage and others like it.¹⁴

As we roared, toyi toied, and sang, we had the feeling that we'd rent the three layers of Absence. It was exhilarating; a shattering of the WHEN of Black Absence; a breaking through to the WHETHER of Human Presence—recognition of ourselves as beings void of the inertia of objects; endowed at last with the force of subjects.

It was, I suspect, that burst of desire for recognition, and the shocking realization of what Blackness as Presence would *really* entail—the violence necessary to enact one moment of Black recognition—that gave comrade Kasrils pause. It would have given us pause as well had we *thought* it instead of *felt* it—had it been transposed from affect into discourse. For turning Absence into Presence is not the same as turning waged workers into free workers. The latter reorganizes the world; the former brings it to an end.

Unlike the delegates, Comrade Kasrils' answer to the question—What does it mean to suffer?—was predicated on economic exploitation and not on anti-Blackness. As a Marxist, Ronnie Kasrils could not imagine a fundamental difference between the worker and the Black. *Kasrils could think historically, politically, and economically, but not ontologically.* Or maybe he did know the difference, as we knew it, intuitively; and was compelled all the more to manage it.

It may seem sacrilegious to accuse White antiapartheid Charterists of anti-Blackness. People like Ronnie Kasrils, Derrick Honnekom, and Albie Sachs risked their lives and ostracization from their families and communities—they gave blood and spilt blood. To imbue them, or the structure of feeling through which they conducted their political life, with the same anti-Blackness that they fought against appears, at first blush, to impose upon them an injudicious form of double jeopardy. The record, however, indicates that anti-Blackness cannot be disentangled from the story of their political ascent.

After the 1976 Children's Revolution, the multiracial ANC absorbed thousands of young cadres who'd been politicized by Black Consciousness and who'd been driven out of the country. The Black Consciousness Movement had no organizational infrastructure outside of South Africa. In short, the ANC was the only viable home in exile. Although the ANC absorbed BC sympathizers into the camps, it simultaneously launched a successful campaign to "prevent any international financing of, and recognition for, BC activities."¹⁵

The marginalizing efforts of the ANC did not unfold in a vacuum. International aid agencies in the West and state sponsors in the Communist

Bloc (CB) had never been predisposed to aiding political and social uplift efforts that were in fee ideologically to Black psychic and political empowerment, first, and coalition politics, second. Western agencies that “were willing to fund the nationalist cause would balk at supporting a movement with... socialist sympathies.” CB states that “might have supported radical political initiatives would not do the same for an organisation that emphasised the significance of colour.”¹⁶ And within South Africa, White intellectuals and organizations wielded hegemonic power resulting in an equally effective crowding out scenario of Black Consciousness. The hydraulics of state repression allowed for a situation whereby “the [White South African] progressives *came up*,” according to a BCM activist at the time. “White organisations... are taking over black-initiated organisations. U.D.F. has whites and gets money from whites.”¹⁷ This is not a conspiracy theory, but an institutional analysis. As David Hirschmann explains, Left-leaning Whites in South Africa:

... have had a powerful influence in integrating class analysis and socialist strategies into the domestic South African anti-*apartheid* debate... at universities, research and support agencies, and in trade unions. [They] have also contributed to the development of the trade union movement which [became] a strong competing political force... [W]hites opposed to the Government have contributed in various ways—organisationally, financially, intellectually, and in terms of personnel and research—to strengthening the non-racial groupings opposed to the B.C.M.¹⁸

Within six years of the state’s murder of Biko, the United Democratic Front (UDF) had “emerged... as the most popular internal South African opposition movement.” By 1987 the UDF “had an annual budget of two million rands and over eighty full-time employees, with affiliated organizations estimated to be receiving approximately 200 million rands in the same year.”¹⁹

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, White politicians had been radicalized by Black Consciousness’ criticism of their liberal hypocrisy. But in the 1980s and 1990s they responded to this radicalization with sullen resentment of the “rejection” they had experienced at the hands of Black Consciousness—the movement that had radicalized them. Rather than explore—and surrender to—the assumptive logic behind their radicalization, and allow Blacks to continue to lead, even if it meant that they (Whites) would be sidelined politically for another ten or twenty years—or, follow Biko’s demand that they work with and against Whites *right where they lived*—they instead attached themselves to trade unions such as COSATU, and to the UDF, and rode back into the center of political life on the wings of a “nonracial” class analysis.²⁰ They “had returned to... opposition politics with a sense

of revenge and vengeance towards the B.C.M.” and through “their access to financial resources and their influence over the media, academia, and publishing houses... they... succeeded in stifling the Movement...”²¹

Even if these White radicals had been persuaded by Biko and Black Consciousness that the essential nature of the antagonism was not capitalism but anti-Blackness (and no doubt some *had* been persuaded), *they could not have been persuaded to organize in a politically masochistic manner*; that is, against the concreteness of their own communities, their own families, and themselves, rather than against the abstraction of “the system”—the targetless nomenclature preferred by the UDF. Political masochism would indeed be ethical but would also bring them to the brink of the abyss of their own subjectivity. They would be embarking upon a political journey the trajectory of which would not simply hold out the promise of obliterating class relations and establishing an egalitarian socius (what less articulate and more starry-eyed White activists in the United States refer to as “vision”), but they would be embarking upon a journey whose trajectory Frantz Fanon called “the end of the world.”²² The “new” world that class-based political “vision” is predicated on (i.e., the dictatorship of the proletariat) isn’t new in the sense that it ushers in an unimaginable episteme; it is really no more than a reorganization of Modernity’s own instruments of knowledge. But a world without race, more precisely, a world without Blackness, is truly unimaginable. Such a world cannot be accomplished with a blueprint of what is to come on the other side. It *must* be undone because, as Biko, Fanon, and others have intimated, it is unethical, but it cannot be refashioned in the mind prior to its undoing. A political project such as this, whereby the only certainty is uncertainty and a loss of all of one’s coordinates, is not the kind of political project Whites could be expected to meditate on, agitate for, theorize, or finance. And though it might not be the kind of project that Blacks would consciously support, it is the essence of the psychic and material *location* of where Blacks *are*. Caught between a shameful return to liberalism and a terrifying encounter with the abyss of Black “life”—caught, that is, between liberalism and death—some White activists took up the banner of socialism, others espoused a vague but vociferous anti-apartheidism, and most simply worked aimlessly yet tirelessly to fortify and extend the interlocutory life of “the ANC’s long-standing policy of deferring consideration of working class interests...until after national liberation had been achieved.”²³

There was no respite from the crowding out scenario elaborated by disaffected White politicians and Charterist stalwarts on the Left, because the hydraulics of outright repression from the Right was just as debilitating. “[I]n the aftermath of the 1976 uprisings the South African Government

proscribed BC organisations and persecuted their leaders—many were banned, imprisoned, and tortured, and some died while in detention,” culminating in the brutal murder of Biko himself. Black Consciousness was caught in a pincer move between White power in what Gramsci designates as “political society,” state coercion, and White power in civil society, benign hegemony of the Left, which culminated in its “removal from the scene, [and] facilitated, at least to some extent, the return to dominance of the A.N.C.”²⁴

It is not my intention to cathedralize the legacy of Steve Biko, nor the analytic framework of Black Consciousness. The archive is as replete with critical analysis of the BCM’s penchant for attracting Black students at the expense of Black workers, its preference for self-help initiatives such as schools and clinics over political mobilization (a preference that can also be seen as a necessity given the swift and uncompromising response to mass mobilization on the part of the state) and its impoverished institutional analysis, as it is with examples of the hydraulics of White backlash. Nonetheless, in the basement of the Allied Bank Building when 100 delegates cheered at Ronnie Kasrils’ news, an impromptu encounter was suddenly staged between Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon—an encounter that caught Kasrils and the leadership by surprise that afternoon in 1992. Perhaps, with a living Steve Biko and a longer shelf life for Black Consciousness, that encounter could have been more coherent and elaborated a more sustained debate between Marx’s worker’s paradise and Fanon’s end of the world. But for this to happen, Black Consciousness would have also had to undergo adjustments in its assumptive logic. Adjustments that would have moved it away from its pragmatic interpretation of Fanon’s dream of disalienation; adjustments that would have allowed it to comprehend those moments in Fanon’s work when Fanon could not make the dispossession of the colonial subject jibe with the dispossession of the Black object or slave: Fanon’s revelations (albeit often more symptomatic than declarative) that Black colony is an oxymoron, for Blacks are not, *essentially*, dispossessed of land or labor power, but dispossessed of being. The Black Consciousness Movement would have had to make adjustments that allowed it to embrace not just the hope of Fanon’s psychoanalytic dream of disalienation, but the abject dereliction implied in Fanon’s unflinching paradigmatic analysis.

Steve Biko and Black Consciousness were compelled to read *Black Skin, White Masks* pragmatically rather than theoretically; thus denying their analysis the most disturbing aspects of *Black Skin, White Masks* which lay in Fanon’s capacity to explain Blackness as an antirelation; that is, as the impossible subjectivity of a sentient being who can have “no recognition in the eyes of” the Other.²⁵ (Fanon himself seems to stumble, accidentally, into much of his paradigmatic analysis.) Black Consciousness latches on to (fetishizes?) the very antithesis of Fanon’s paradigmatic analysis and does

so in the name of Fanon—or, more accurately, in the name of the Fanon it prefers the Fanon of disalienation, the Fanon who heals.

This theoretical slippage within Black Consciousness stems from the fact that although its structure of feeling attends to the abject dereliction that characterizes Black dispossession, *its actual discourse imagines Black dispossession through the rubric of decolonization*: this is to say, Black Consciousness *feels* the distinction between the postemancipation subject and the postcolonial subject, but it is unable (or unwilling) to *be elaborated by* the grammar of accumulation and fungibility, rather than the grammar of exploitation and alienation.²⁶ This slippage in Black Consciousness can be traced to both its selective and utilitarian reading of Fanon, as well as to the hydraulics of state terror, that were acutely draconian during the time of Steve Biko (making any form of reflection a miracle). It should be remembered that not only was it treasonous to call for an end to apartheid but it was also treasonous to call state terror “terror.” Every enunciation had to function like a feint, a slight of hand, part call to arms, part allegory. That anything at all was said under such conditions is a testament to the will and courage of Biko and his comrades. I proceed, therefore, in full recognition that the power of understanding (analysis) is sometimes incompatible with the need to empower (struggle).

Like Marxism, Black Consciousness was also hobbled in an essential way. Fundamental to Marxism is the notion that the world is unethical due to its subsumption by relations of capital. What we learn from Fanon and others is that the world is unethical due to its subsumption by the slave relation. The slave relation, then, relegates the capital relation (the irreconcilability between the position of the worker and the position of the capitalist) to a conflict, and not the antagonism that Marx (and the South African Charterists) perceived it to be. The worker/capitalist relation can no longer be perceived as an antagonism because were it to be “solved” (were it to cease to exist as a relation, after the victory of the proletariat), the world would still be subsumed by the slave relation: an antagonism not between the position of the worker and that of the boss, but between the Human and the Black. One of the more lasting contributions of Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* has been his thesis that work, or forced labor, is not a *constituent element* of slavery, but an incidental (though commonplace) *experience* of the slave. Patterson’s corrective involves seeing slavery, first and foremost, as a *structuring relation* that constitutes the paradigm of human interaction. The slave overdetermines Human relationality because without the slave there would be no foundation for Human exchange. In other words, humanity can only occur at the place and in the time where the slave is not; but the slave, however, must be present (whether figuratively or literally) if humanity is to experience its time and place imbued

with coherence. To properly define slavery, Patterson elaborates "three sets of constituent features corresponding to... three sets of power." First, naked might—what I refer to as gratuitous violence. This violence is akin to an ontological first moment—or a point of paradigmatic origin, in that, once inside the paradigm one feels (experiences) its timelessness and its boundless cartography. "This act of violence constitutes the prehistory of all stratified societies," Welskopf argued, "but it determines both 'the prehistory and (concurrent) history of slavery.'" The second element in the slave relation is natal alienation, "that aspect of [slavery] which rests on authority, on the control of symbolic instruments... [T]he definition of the slave, *however recruited*, as a socially dead person." Finally, Patterson points out, slaves are "dishonored in a generalized way... due to the origin of his status, the indignity and all-pervasiveness of his indebtedness, his absence of any independent social existence, but most of all because he was without power except through another."²⁷ The homologies between Patterson's slave and Gordon's Black, are striking; and they subtend two points fundamental to my argument: (1) that exploitation and alienation is not the essential rubric of suffering for a being who is a "being for the captor"—this rubric must be replaced by accumulation and fungibility; and (2) that it is impossible to disentangle both Blackness and Africanness from the constituent elements of slavery since their emergence and legibility are inextricably bound with the centuries old process through which subjects were turned into objects.²⁸

In much of Biko's work, one finds a structure of feeling that *senses* this fundamental antagonism and seems to know, though without analytic rigor, that an analysis based primarily on resource dispossession is not underwritten by the Black's grammar of suffering. But the literature also exhibits a repeated disavowal of the paradigmatic analysis which would seem to be foundational to its structure of feeling: namely, that there can be no calibration between the Black and the Human without the world literally and figuratively coming to an end; that is say, without the destruction of all that makes relationality possible in Modernity. Put another way, Black Consciousness *knows intuitively* that the only way Humanity can maintain both its corporeal and libidinal integrity is through the various strategies through which Blackness is the abyss into which Humanness can never fall; but it *disavows this knowledge intellectually* in an attempt to entify that which cannot be entified.

I borrow the concept of entification from psychoanalysis in order to connote a process through which the analysand collapses the signifier with the signified and, in so doing, *fills up*, entifies the signifier and makes it appear to be identical with itself. Thus, the analysand is able to represent her/his subjectivity as an undivided, present, and unified self. Of course, the myth

of a present and unified subject is deconstructed by both Marxism and psychoanalysis—and the analysand who persists in this delusional speech predicated on this collapse of the signifier and signified will suffer the neurosis of what Lacan calls “empty speech,” the speech of entification, or egoic monumentalization, until s/he reaches the end of analysis wherein s/he accepts and learns to live with the inevitable chasm between her/his *being* and the symbolic strategies s/he uses to represent *being*.²⁹ Psychoanalysis must bring the analysand to the realization “that he is nothing, absolutely nothing—and that he must put an end to the narcissism on which he relies in order to imagine that he is different from the other ‘animals.’”³⁰

But entification would seem to be a precondition of a political project. There is a type-persona for whom a movement fights and there is corresponding loss that a movement seeks to regain for this type-persona. A movement cannot be built, let alone sustained, on behalf of “nothing, absolutely nothing”—a nonentity. What would the politics of a dead relation, a slave, look like? Again, a political movement must be built and sustained on behalf of *someone* who has lost *something*. Necessity may have required Black Consciousness to monumentalize the ego of a dead relation. “In the words of Barney Pityana [Biko’s successor as SASO President], it was essential ‘to pump life into his empty shell . . . to infuse him with pride and dignity.’”³¹ Black Consciousness sought “to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook on life.”³² But for Black pride to become a tangible goal, something at the level of understanding had to be scuttled with respect to a paradigmatic analysis of Black positionality.

Will the “Real” Fanon Please Stand Up?

There are three Fanons, maybe more. There is the Fanon who heals the psyche, a psychoanalyst who disalienates his analysand. There is the Fanon who rebels against society, a revolutionary whose call to arms speaks of the cleansing properties of violence and the strategies through which social structures can be upended. Finally, there is the Fanon who explains the paradigm, by subordinating Marx’s wage relation and Freud’s Oedipal relation to the Human relation—a relation guaranteed by the slave. Neither of these three Fanons are neatly tucked away in separate volumes, nor do individual chapters compartmentalize them. The (sometimes conflicting) echoes of all three can be found in a single book, or woven disturbingly into a single sentence. The sign of the three Fanons in *Black Skin, White Masks* attends to three levels of subjectivity: *Preconscious interests*, *unconscious identifications*, and *structural positionality*.

The level of *preconscious interest* comprises those aspects of the divided subject that can be brought into speech; that the subject can enunciate about her/himself. The level of preconscious interests encounters contradictions (sometimes of crisis proportions) when it is confronted with the level of *unconscious identifications*, or desire. Positive affirmations of *interest* are often not in compliance with desire's affective destinations (i.e., I may *claim* to be Black but I may *want* unconsciously to be White). Unconscious identifications are never quite so tangible and resolute, nor can they be "known" at the moment of identification.

The level of unconscious identifications is where Frantz Fanon began his interventions. His attempts to root out a neurosis that yearns for "lactification" or, in clinical terms, "hallucinatory whitening," are at the heart of his quest for psychic disalienation.³³

If [my patient] is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible [and]...derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex... [Thus] he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation... As a psychoanalyst, I should help my patient to become *conscious* of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at a hallucinatory whitening...³⁴

Like Fanon the healer, Biko also believed that "the first step in the process of disalienation and decolonization is the eradication of Western values... [which] make it difficult for blacks to reverse their position of subservience and dependency."³⁵ "At the heart of this kind of thinking," Biko wrote, "is the realisation by blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."³⁶

Finally, *Black Skin, White Masks* is attentive to the subject's *structural positionality*. This is the level of subjectivity that bears most essentially on political ontology. It is the level of subjectivity that most profoundly exceeds and anticipates the subject. It literally positions him/her paradigmatically. For example, one is born pregendered, which is to say a place, a position, boy or girl, son or daughter, literally *waits for* (anticipates) one, and *envelopes* (exceeds) one upon arrival. As one evolves, one can "challenge" one's position within this filial, gendered, and often Oedipal paradigm.³⁷ That is to say, one can be positioned as a boy and claim effeminacy (assert "identity" at the level of preconscious interests); or one can unconsciously desire effeminacy, but one cannot dismantle the filial economy through which one is always already positioned as boy or girl.

The economic paradigm (political economy), which also exceeds and anticipates (positions) the subject, according to Marx and his political heirs, is even more intransigent than the filial paradigm. Leopoldina Fortunati

argues that there is no exchange of filial affection (i.e., the nurturing of children by parents, the nurturing of parents by children, or sexual encounters between parents) that is not in service to the reproduction of labor power and therefore to the valorization of capital.³⁸ In light of this, she argues that in order to destroy relations of capital and not simply democratize networks of distribution (à la the ANC's early Reconstruction and Development Program and subsequent "initiatives" by the Government of National Unity), community itself must be subverted and destroyed, that means the destruction of filiation, as it is currently constituted.

But Fanon reveals a structural relation that is more comprehensive, more devastating, more essential, and therefore more unethical than either the filial relation or the capital relation—namely, the Human relation. The filial relation is unethical because it is overdetermined by the Name of the Father and because it is parasitic on the position known as female. It subsumes the world in asymmetrical power relations predicated on gender. The capital relation is unethical because it is parasitic on the worker's labor power. It subsumes the world in asymmetrical power relations predicated on class.

At a glance, it would appear as if Fanon's meditations coalesce around the following postulate: The Human relation is unethical because it relegates Blacks to the lowest rung of Humanity; and because it subsumes the world in asymmetrical power relations predicated on race. In point of fact, Fanon's revelations are more severe than that. Race is a vertical distribution of values *within* Humanity. But a Black is a sentient being positioned below, or beyond, Humanity's distribution of values. The Black/Human dyad is essential to the Human relation(s), or to relationality as an ensemble of capacities (i.e. Gordon's perspectivity) through which one knows one is among the living. For without the Black, Human relationality would be illegible. Put the other way round, were the Black to become legible, that is acquire Human value (even low Human value), Humanity would expand into a shapeless, worthless, and incoherent mass. The unethical structure of political economy lies in the fact that its Other is the worker. The unethical structure of filiation lies in the fact that its Other is the woman. The unethical structure of Humanity lies in the fact that its Other is the Black. Fanon illustrates this in his famous rejoinders to Jean-Paul Sartre. Biko applauded the first rejoinder and elaborated it in the discourse of Black Consciousness.

Sartre attempts to applaud Negritude (and its poetic revival of Africanisms) with one hand, celebrating it as a powerful cry of anticolonial rage and with the other hand he condescends, suggesting that Negritude is no more than a minor term on the dialectic. The works of Fanon and Biko are united in their orientation toward Negritude, but only up to a point. Both agree that Negritude is an important tool for finding meaning and self-worth in an anti-Black world. But Biko seems to think of Negritude

as being vital to the foundation of a disalienated Black identity. For Fanon, Black identity is a provisional, if not suspect, category whose points of reference are at turns unknowable and unattainable.

For Biko, Negritude (and cultural Pan-Africanism) had all the accoutrements of a discourse that can aid and abet the reconstitution of the Black's subjective integrity as well as "teach the Westerner a lesson or two."³⁹

Thus, in its entirety the African Culture spells us out as a people particularly close to nature. As [former Zambian President Kenneth] Kaunda puts it, our people may be unlettered and their physical horizons may be limited yet "they inhabit a larger world than the sophisticated Westerner who has magnified his physical senses through inverted gadgets at the price all too often of cutting out the dimension of the spiritual." This close proximity to Nature enables the emotional component in us to be so much richer in that it makes possible for us, without any apparent difficulty to feel for people and to easily identify with them in any emotional situation arising out of suffering.⁴⁰

But for Fanon, these ideas run the risk of reversing racist stereotypes by celebrating them, or worse, reinforcing a delusion that Blacks were made to rule the world with their intuition.⁴¹ He responds with sarcasm to the "Nature" Biko celebrates.

I was told by a friend [that], "The presence of the Negroes beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance." At last I had been recognized, I was no longer a zero.⁴²

This split between Biko and Fanon vis-à-vis Negritude and the place of African culture in disalienation and political struggle, however, is not predicated on a difference regarding the truth claims of what is or is not Negritude or African culture; but on whether or not cultural empowerment can enable a comprehensive and sustainable liberation or a limited and provisional one. Fanon's skepticism, as regards the former, is based on the argument that no program of self-worth can bring the Black into Human recognition, upon which relationality is predicated.

Despite his key departure from Biko as regards Negritude (and African cultural revival), Fanon does not join the Marxist chorus that asserts that Negritude is a minor term on the dialectic. Fanon was incensed by Sartre's assertion that, as a moment of negativity in the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic, Negritude was no more than a predetermined stage in fee to the victory of the proletariat and to Negro political maturity, when "the subjective, existential, ethnic idea of *negritude* 'passes,' as Hegel puts it, into the objective, positive, exact idea of the proletariat."⁴³

Forty years later, Sartre's assessment of Negritude was echoed in Left wing scholars' postmortem examinations of Black Consciousness, as exemplified in David Hirschmann's pronouncements:

As the antithetical stage of the revolutionary dialectic the Black Consciousness Movement was bound to work for its own abolition... Once black people have engaged in revolutionary activity and erected the foundations of a new society, the Black Consciousness Movement will be superseded, since the clash between the polar opposites will have resulted in a new synthesis.⁴⁴

Biko's response to such White Leftist assessment of Black Consciousness exhibits a stunning mutuality to Fanon's response to Sartre:

They tell us that the situation is a class struggle rather than a racial one. Let them go to van Tonder in the Free State and tell him this... The *thesis*, the *antithesis* and the *synthesis* have been mentioned by some great philosophers as the cardinal points around which any social revolution revolves. For the *liberals*, the *thesis* is apartheid, the *anti-thesis* is non-racialism, but the *synthesis* is very feebly defined... The *thesis* is in fact a strong white racism and therefore, the *antithesis* to this must, *ipso facto*, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey.⁴⁵

And Fanon's outrage at Sartre resulted in this famous rejoinder that was later recouped in the literature of Black Consciousness:

[B]lack consciousness is immanent in its own eyes. I am not a potentiality of something, I am wholly what I am. I do not have to look for the universal. No probability has any place inside me. My Negro consciousness does not hold itself out as a lack. It *is*. It is its own follower.⁴⁶

Here, Fanon and Biko's support for Black consciousness, and their disparagement of Sartre's strange rendering of Hegelian dialectics (his crude materialism), run along parallel lines.

But through Fanon's extended rejoinder to Sartre (in which he draws a sharp and controversial distinction between the grammar of Jewish suffering, as elaborated in Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*, and the grammar of Black suffering) we witness Fanon's point of departure from Biko's assumptive logic. By now, Fanon's penultimate claim in his rejoinder is well known: "ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; but he must be black in relation to the white man."⁴⁷ Fanon is arguing that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the world's entire semantic field—regardless of cultural

and national discrepancies, that is, “leaving existence by the wayside”—in other words, the Modern episteme, is sutured by anti-Black solidarity. This is a dialectic of negativity, that offers no imaginable synthesis—not Sartre’s dialectic through which the oppressed worker becomes the proletariat, nor Biko’s dialectic through which the Black becomes a “man” [sic].

The importance of this for our meditation on Biko’s Black Consciousness can be stated simply: empowerment predicated on Black Consciousness can only impact/liberate the Black at the level of preconscious interests and at the level of unconscious identifications; but not at the level of structural positionality. Psychic disalienation is therefore a problematic conception of emancipation in a world where anti-Blackness is a structural necessity and a paradigmatic constant. Black Consciousness cannot restore the Black to a world predicated on his/her absence. No matter what Blacks do (fight in the realm of preconscious interest or heal disalienation in the realm of unconscious desire), Blackness cannot attain relationality. Whereas Humans are positioned on the plane of *being* and, thus, are present, alive, through struggles of/for/through/over recognition, Blacks can neither attain nor contest the plane of recognition. That is to say “Black Human” remains an oxymoron regardless of political victories in the social order or the psychic health of the mind; not because of the intransigence of White racism, or the hobble of the talking cure in the face of hallucinatory whitening, but because were there to be a place and time for Blacks, cartography and temporality would be impossible.

“My *black consciousness* is immanent in its own eyes”; but my *Black being* “has no resistance in the eyes of the White man.”⁴⁸ The first clause is a central tenet in the assumptive logic of Steve Biko’s Black Consciousness. It speaks to the register of preconscious interests and, perhaps, unconscious identifications. But the second clause points to a partition between how the Black *imagines* him/herself (the interests of Black Consciousness and attempts to disalienate the psyche) and how the Black is *positioned* (as a dead entity in a paradigm of living entities). My Black consciousness may well be immanent in my eyes, but my eyes are not Human eyes, they are Black, unworldly, eyes. Thus, my gaze, a blackened gaze, cannot reposition me, cannot restore me to a paradigm whose coherence—that is the integrity of Humanity at every scale: the national, the civic, the domestic, the corporeal—is predicated on the production and reproduction of my non-being. I am not a weak cousin, or a stepchild within the paradigm; rather I have no claims to relationality writ large.⁴⁹ And my cry to the contrary, my Black consciousness or Negritude, does not restore me to relationality; it makes me crazy, or religious, or provisionally empowered. It is an unworldly claim upon the world—a leap of faith. Through it I may find a place in heaven (or in hell) but I remain unplaced here on earth.

Biko attempted to “rescue” the Black through the rubric of Human relationality. But Human relationality is defined in absolute opposition to Blackness. For the Black to become Human, relationality itself, as defined and constituted by the march of Modernity, would have to be destroyed. Herein lies the rupture between two of Biko’s objectives, the goal to disalienate and mobilize Blacks for the seizure of state power (changes at the levels of desire and interest) and the goal to bring Blackness into Humanness (a structural destruction).

Conclusion

In this essay I have distanced myself from a romantic revision of Black Consciousness as a revolutionary panacea that would have saved the liberation movement from itself and thus averted the dreadful sellout of 1994: the terms of surrender referred to first, by Mandela, as Peace and Reconciliation; and then, by Mbeki, as the African Renaissance. Some would claim that if not for the murder of Steve Biko; if not for the Soviets’ and the West’s unwillingness to underwrite Black Consciousness; if not for the vengeful backlash unleashed by White radicals who’d been sidelined by Black Consciousness in the 1970s, the “New” South Africa would have emerged in 1994 with uncompromising strategies for the eradication of surplus value, market relations, *as well as* anti-Blackness. This argument could not be made convincingly, in my view. It is not a foregone conclusion that had Black, African Steve Bantu Biko been sitting onstage, chairing the Rolling Mass Action Committee meeting in 1992, instead of White, Jewish Ronnie Kasrils, the affective resonance between the leaders and the led would have been free of dissonance, or that a Black structure of feeling would have enunciated a Black grammar of suffering.

But I believe that had Biko lived, and had the Black Consciousness Movement survived as a credible alternative to the ANC and the UDF, the ethical imperatives of class analysis, that were hegemonic and unchallenged within the Charterist Movement, might have experienced a distended calculus through which the grammar of suffering could be debated rather than assumed.

Steve Biko and Black Consciousness were not victims of contradictions internal to the logic of their discourse, my critique notwithstanding. Black Consciousness didn’t peter out, it was drummed out. Biko wasn’t a victim of his thinking he was a murder victim. And given the conditions under which Black Consciousness was elaborated—between the crosshairs and without sanctuary—it’s remarkable that it survived for as

long as it did and that its message was potent enough to spark the 1976 uprising, replenish the rank and file of the ANC, and stiffen the ANC's resolve to fight as it had never fought before.⁵⁰ An ANC that would betray the mandate it might never have resecured were it not for Biko and Black Consciousness.

Notes

Special thanks to Janet Neary and Anita Wilkins for their research assistance.

1. Lewis Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995), 98.
2. Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: The Bowerdean Press, 1978), 63.
3. Aimé Césaire quoted in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952 and 1967), 96.
4. To my knowledge the term anti-Blackness was first named, as a structural imperative, by Lewis Gordon in *Bad Faith*.
5. David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 15 and 19.
6. Gordon, *Bad Faith*, 103.
7. *Ibid.*, 99.
8. *Ibid.*, 100.
9. *Ibid.*, 101.
10. *Ibid.*, 100.
11. *Ibid.*, 101.
12. *Ibid.*, 100.
13. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 112.
14. I explore this assertion in more detail below.
15. David Hirschmann, "The Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 28, no. 1 (1990): 16.
16. Kogila Moodley, "The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness in South Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 29, no. 2 (1991): 246–247.
17. Quoted in Hirschmann, "The Black Consciousness Movement," 19 (my emphasis).
18. *Ibid.*, 18.
19. Anthony W. Marx, "Race, Nation, and Class Based Ideologies in Recent Opposition in South Africa," *Comparative Politics* 23, no. 3 (1991): 317 and 319.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 19.
22. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 96.
23. Marx, "Race, Nation, and Class," 320.
24. Hirschmann, "The Black Consciousness Movement," 17.
25. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 110.
26. I am thankful to Jared Sexton and Saidiya Hartman for the nomenclature that helps to clarify these distinctions.
27. Orlando Patterson, "The Constituent Elements of Slavery," in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 10.
28. See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of

- Chicago Press, 2003), 203–229; Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).
29. See Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 66.
 30. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 22.
 31. Quoted in Hirschmann, “The Black Consciousness Movement,” 5.
 32. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 49.
 33. For lactification and hallucinatory whitening, see Fanon, *Black Skin*, 47 and 100 respectively.
 34. *Ibid.*, 100.
 35. Thomas Ranuga, “Frantz Fanon and Black Consciousness in Azania (South Africa),” *Phylon* 47, no. 3 (1986): 183.
 36. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 92.
 37. Fanon did not view the Oedipus complex as constituent to the structure of Black suffering: “[A] black colonized family does not mirror the colonizing nation, neuroses arise not from within the kinship group but from contact with the (white) outside world.” Deborah Wyrick, *Fanon for Beginners* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishers, 1998), 43; Fanon, *Black Skin*, 142.
 38. Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (New York: Autonomedia, 1992).
 39. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 30.
 40. *Ibid.*, 46.
 41. For a graphic illustration of this, see the artwork in *Fanon for Beginners*, 39–40; Fanon, *Black Skin*, 126–127.
 42. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 129.
 43. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Orphée Noir*, preface to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France: 1948), xl, ff. Quoted in Fanon, *Black Skin*, 132–133.
 44. Hirschmann, “The Black Consciousness Movement,” 317–318.
 45. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, 89–90.
 46. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 135.
 47. *Ibid.*, 110.
 48. *Ibid.*, 135 and 110 (emphasis mine).
 49. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 3–15.
 50. “Between October 1976 and March 1978, the ANC launched 112 attacks within South Africa . . . This level of activity became possible only after June 1976, with the inflow to the ANC of [Black Consciousness] students fleeing South Africa.” Marx, *Race, Nation, and Class*, 326.